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ABSTRACT

Current developments in experiential learning, especially as it applies to adult learners, are discussed. Experiential learning is defined as "prior learning (which is) those nonacademic life or work experiences that students have acquired before formal contact with the institution and for which they desire recognition in the form of credits towards a degree." Prior learning assessment procedures are examined with emphasis placed on the portfolio assessment procedure, which involves eight tasks: (1) establishment of method by institutions for assisting the student in returning to school and introducing him or her to the experiential learning concept; (2) identification by students of their prior learning experience, through such techniques as resumes, autobiographies or a chronicle of work, social, and personal experiences; (3) identification by students of their learning outcomes and expressing them in ways that can be measured; (4) articulation of prior learning outcomes by the student; (5) documentation of experiences and outcomes by the student; (6) measurement of the experiential learning outcomes by the institution; (7) judgment of prior learning outcomes by college; and (8) evaluation and recording of prior learning outcomes by the college. An example of a portfolio assessment procedure at the Memphis State University's University College is provided. Cost considerations are also discussed. (SPG)

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IMPLEMENTING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR ADULT STUDENTS by Carol Herrnstadt Shulman

This report will look at current developments in experiential learning, especially as it applies to adult learners. As used here, "experiential" learning refers to:

prior learning [which is] those *nonacademic* life or work experiences which students have acquired before formal contact with the institution and for which they desire recognition in the form of credits toward degrees (Meyer 1975, p. 1).

Experiential learning is a particularly appropriate vehicle for adult learners who are seeking further education for personal and career development, since it recognizes that adults' work and volunteer experiences may form the basis for their academic program.

Colleges and universities may serve an important public interest by meeting the needs of these adult learners. But as organizations primarily geared to the needs of a younger age group, colleges may have to adjust policies and programs to facilitate the adult's reentry into higher education and to recognize that, unlike younger students, adults may already possess experience-based, college-level learning, for which they want credit. Academic administrators faced with this situation may find that the research and development work in experiential learning is valuable in promoting their own educational objectives for adults.

Experiential Learning Theory

Advocates of an experiential learning approach contend that "knowledge is valid regardless of source" (Meyer 1975, p. 11). They suggest that the difference between experiential learning and classroom learning is the process by which learning is acquired; the substance and quality of the learning itself are seen as equivalent. Working from this premise, educators have developed a theory of how learning through experience is achieved. This theory is basic to an understanding of why specific assessment techniques, different from those traditionally used at higher education institutions, may be required for experiential learners.

James S. Coleman observes that the learning process as it occurs through experience is nearly the reverse of the academic learning process. In the latter, which he calls "information assimilation," four

steps occur: first, the student receives information through a symbolic medium such as a lecture or book; second, the student assimilates and organizes the material so that a general principle is understood; third, the student infers a particular application from a general principle and fourth, the student puts the knowledge gained in the earlier steps into practice. Completion of this step indicates that the learning process has been completed (Coleman 1976, pp. 50-51).

The experiential learner, however, begins his learning by acting and seeing the effects of his action; second, he must understand these effects in a specific situation so that he can predict their recurrence if the same circumstances are repeated; third, he must distill and understand the general principle that governs these actions and their consequences; and fourth, he must be able to apply the general principle "through action in a new circumstance within the range of generalization" (Coleman 1976, p. 52).

Implementing Experiential Learning

For the experiential learning approach to become a viable option in higher education, colleges and universities need to establish experiential learning programs of integrity. Worthwhile programs can then create a rippling effect—their merit encourages other institutions to implement prior learning assessment programs. Moreover, the growth of such programs may spur other institutions to accept students' experiential learning credits. Two factors are of primary importance to make the assessment of prior learning a credible enterprise on the institutional and national levels: First, a program rationale that is in harmony with institutional purposes; and second, the use of valid and reliable assessment techniques and procedures that are appropriate for the learning being evaluated.

With respect to the first consideration, experiential learning experts generally agree that a prior learning assessment program will enhance its possibilities for institutional support if its rationale is in harmony with other program or institutional goals. Barton (in Keeton 1976) points out that

the goal of the assessment of experience . . . [is to assess] the degree to which a person, through experience, has achieved some of the educational goals of a particular institution (p. 128).

This view leaves the possibility of experiential learning programs open to virtually all higher education institutions. For assistance in selecting the rationales that are appropriate to their institution, campus officials may find Willingham and Geisinger's taxonomy useful. They propose three categories for developing program rationales: (1) "philosophical-educational orientation"; (2) "institution-oriented justification"; and (3) "student-oriented justification" (in Willingham and Nesbitt 1976, p. 5-6). As this taxonomy indicates, a wide variety of rationales can be developed. For example, the first category includes "equivalence to actual coursework, transfer credit, etc."; in comparison, the second category lists "using the institution's resources more efficiently" and "moving into a new (substantive) field or area."

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Although rationales for experiential learning are a basic institutional concern, activists in the field have focused their efforts on the second issue, i.e. new assessment procedures for evaluating prior learning and new assessment tools for measuring that learning. The latter effort is necessary because traditional testing methods used for students exposed to specific coursework or curricula are frequently inappropriate for testing knowledge gained through a wide range of experiences, which were often undertaken without regard for possible learning outcomes. Moreover, new, sound assessment procedures are necessary to insure that credit for experiential learning is accepted on an equal footing with traditional academic credit (Willingham in Keeton 1976; see also American Council on Education 1977). Major issues in assessment include:

- How can prior learning be identified
- What constitutes college-level learning
- What learning should be accepted for credit
- What methods should be used to describe and document the learning
- Who should evaluate the learning
- How should experiential learning credit be transcribed

These issues are implicit in the six steps that Willingham (1977) has identified as common elements in any procedure for assessing prior learning. The six steps are: *identify* college-level learning acquired through life experience; *articulate* how and what parts of that learning are related to the degree objective; *document* evidence of learning; *measure* the extent and character of learning acquired; *evaluate* whether the learning meets an acceptable standard and determine its credit equivalence; *transcribe* the credit or recognition of learning (Willingham 1977, p. 6).

The portfolio assessment process is an exemplary vehicle for bringing these issues together for discussion. The portfolio is a compilation of evidence of prior learning. More completely, the portfolio is "the result of a process by which experiences can be translated into educational outcomes or competencies, documented, and assessed for academic credit or recognition" (Forrest, Knapp, and Pendergrass in Keeton 1976, p. 162). Seen in this light, the portfolio process is a basic tool for establishing the credibility of an experiential learning program. That is, students' portfolios can be viewed as the end-product of an institution's prior learning program. If these portfolios demonstrate that the college requires rigorous evidence of experiential learning, then they promote the development of the assessment program. In fact, institutions may apply more rigorous standards to these programs than they do to more traditional academic programs (Forrest et al. 1976).

In her guide to developing a portfolio assessment program, Joan Knapp (1977) describes the methods that may be used in completing a portfolio; the steps in this procedure present the issues cited above. *First*, institutions need to establish methods for assisting the student in returning to school and introducing him or her to the experiential learning concept. This step is particularly important because adults are frequently intimidated by the prospect of reentry and of identifying prior learning (Meyer 1975; Knapp 1977). *Second*, students need to identify their prior learning experiences, through such techniques as résumés, autobiographies or a chronicle of work, social, and personal experiences. *Third*, students need to identify learning outcomes and express them in ways that can be measured, that show a conceptual understanding of their learning experiences as discussed in the section on experiential learning theory, that demonstrate they are at the college or graduate level and reflect current knowledge, and then the student must

relate these outcomes to some educational objectives. *Fourth*, the student must articulate prior learning outcomes. That is, he must relate his learning to his future objectives through such methods as an intellectual or thematic narrative. *Fifth*, he must document the experiences and outcomes. *Sixth*, the institution measures the experiential learning outcomes through such means as product assessment or oral interviews. *Seventh*, the college judges prior learning outcomes by tools such as rating systems and criterion standards administered by expert assessors. And *eighth*, the college evaluates and records prior learning outcomes. This process involves the institution in decisions about assigning academic credit for prior learning and finding a suitable method for transcribing this credit.

Obviously, considerable effort is required to implement each of these eight tasks. College planners need to develop specific policies and procedures for each step. A report from the University College of Memphis State University (Ranta in Cooperative Assessment 1976) offers a concrete example of a portfolio assessment procedure. The University College's procedure requires, first of all, that the student attempt to achieve credit for prior learning through more traditional methods available at MSU before beginning the expensive and difficult process of portfolio assessment. To qualify for the evaluation process the student must have formally applied to the University College and paid both an application and contract/advising fee. Then, the student prepares a portfolio of his adult learning experiences that he wishes to offer for evaluation. In doing this, the student fills out both a brief outline form on past work experiences and interests and a long form that requires details of educational background, work and training, and other learning experiences. Documentation is required for each section; the form suggests possible kinds of documentation. Next, the student's Contract, Advising Committee assists the student in identifying competencies developed from these experiences and advises him in whether to seek credit for these competencies by portfolio assessment or more traditional methods. The decision on the amount of credit to be sought is made by the assessment faculty and approved by the Dean of the College. At this stage, the student is also assisted with preparation of necessary forms and documentation. The portfolio then goes to the Dean of the College who chooses an assessor or an assessment committee. The assessor determines the methods of evaluation to be used, and then interviews the student to verify the information presented in the portfolio and to gather any additional information. The faculty member may also turn to other sources for information on the student's knowledge and abilities.

To evaluate the student, the faculty member follows detailed criteria established by the college. He then writes an evaluation recommending for or against credit, the amount of credit, and the level of credit. This evaluation and the student's portfolio go to the Dean of the College for approval. The student is next notified of the Dean's decision and pays a credit evaluation fee for each credit hour granted. Finally, the Dean notifies the Records office of the amount of credit awarded.

College planners who are interested in assessing prior learning at their institutions will find that the difficult spadework of developing assessment tools has been undertaken by the Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL), formerly the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning. This organization has produced assessment materials such as descriptions of competencies, procedures, and forms tested through critical evaluation, experimental use, and validation studies. The results of these efforts

are available as CAEL-produced handbooks and guides for institutions, faculty, and students (see bibliography at the end of this report for a partial listing). In addition, CAEL sponsored an Operational Models Project to assist twelve institutions in implementing prior learning assessment procedures and in integrating these procedures into the available academic structure. These CAEL institutional case studies are another source of information for planners.

In a related effort, the Office on Educational Credit (OEC) of the American Council on Education has materials and expertise available for institutions interested in assessing sponsored noncollegiate learning. The OEC facilitates assessment of "extra-institutional learning," i.e., learning that is attained outside the sponsorship of legally authorized and accredited postsecondary institutions ("Educational Credit" . . . 1977, p. vii). In particular, the OEC has developed recommendations for academic credit of military courses based on a detailed study of these programs (*Guide to the Evaluation* . . . 1976); and a similar publication is available for courses sponsored by business (*The National Guide* . . . 1978). In addition, the OEC is in the process of working out guidelines for awarding credit based on examinations, such as the College Level Entrance Examination Program (CLEP). It is also considering the possibility of developing materials on union training programs, which are another possible source of experience-trained students (Spill 1977; see also Gray 1975).

Financial Issues

Financial considerations may be a major factor for many colleges in their decision about whether to develop a program for assessing prior learning. Such a program may be appealing because of its promise of attracting adults to campus at a time of low enrollment. Some institutions, however, may be discouraged from this undertaking if the costs of individual assessment seem prohibitive (Moon 1977). In addition, state funding policies may hamper the development of experiential programs because funds are allocated along traditional lines. Most formulas assume a course credit-hour or student credit-hour as the basis for allocation; consequently, nontraditional programs "are often underfunded and thus denied a chance to demonstrate their full effectiveness" (Meeth 1975, p. 4; see also Fehnel and Sundberg 1976).

One case study (Kelly et al. 1976) illustrates that cost considerations need to be viewed in a program context. Webster College (Missouri) has two assessment programs, both of which use faculty and staff to evaluate student portfolios. One program is conducted at the Contract Center for the undergraduate college; the other program is sponsored by the Masters of Arts Individualized (MAI) degree program. A cost analysis revealed that the former program, which has a high volume of students, results in a substantial increase in income to the institution. Students who earn a substantial number of credits through assessment yield a cost surplus of more than \$32 per assessed credit, while students who receive more class instruction yield a cost surplus of more than \$55 per assessed credit. In contrast, for students in the MAI program, which has a low assessment volume, costs exceed income by about \$30. Despite this difference in income, the MAI program will not increase its volume because assessment of prior learning is not one of its primary objectives. It will continue to offer assessment as a service to its students but will increase its fees to better approximate costs. The Contract Center, however, has assessment of prior learning as a major goal; therefore, it is increasing its capacity to conduct assessments.

Current Initiatives

In recent years, supporters of experiential learning have made considerable progress in converting experiential learning from a

new, untried concept in postsecondary education to a solid theoretical and practical approach to learning. Current efforts are directed toward enlarging upon this success by informing the higher education community about the possibilities available to institutions in the field of experiential learning.

The Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning is the major source of information on experiential learning and the single organization most active in promoting such programs and developing valid and reliable assessment tools. Currently, CAEL has about 300 institutional and individual members, and it sponsors four major experiential learning efforts: (1) a publications program; (2) an annual national CAEL "assembly," and a series of regional meetings; (3) an extensive Institutional Development Program begun in 1977 for about 200 institutions. The IDP assists colleges to develop and refine experiential learning programs for their specific needs, and it is expected to continue for the next three to five years. As part of this project, CAEL is conducting a national survey to list and describe programs and practices that have experiential components; and (4) a Panel of Experiential Educational Resources (PEERS). This is a service in which CAEL links professionals in the field of experiential learning with interested members of the higher education community. All these efforts are in part directed toward solving the communications problem which CAEL perceives as a major difficulty. That is, CAEL believes that experiential learning can become an important option for adults and institutions if they become aware of the methods and materials that facilitate the assessment of experiential learning and make an assessment program a credible and worthwhile enterprise (Barnford-Rees 1977).

In this connection, a new education service may promote the growth of experiential learning programs by informing adults of resources available to them. Educational brokerages are "go-betweens or intermediaries which serve to help adult students find their way into and through the experience of postsecondary education" (Heffernan et al. 1976, p. v). They counsel adults on their personal and career goals, and then assist them in setting their educational objectives and selecting learning experiences that will lead to competencies and certification. Finally, they help adult students gain access to appropriate learning opportunities (Heffernan et al. 1976). A National Center for Educational Brokering has been established with offices in Washington, D.C.

Experiential learning programs may also benefit from the research and development work undertaken in 1977 by the College Entrance Examination Board's three-year study on "Future Directions for a Learning Society." With a nearly \$2 million grant from the Exxon Education Foundation, the Board will look at developments in the adult learning society, exploring several issues that touch upon experiential learning questions (*Prospectus • Future* . . . 1977; "Future Needs . . ." 1977). One result of these investigations might be the development of improved psychometric methods for assessing for credit the experiential learning of large numbers of people (Moon 1977).

Conclusion

Credit for prior learning is one way to attract adult students to college campuses. Its implementation comes at a propitious time as colleges seek new sources of enrollment to supplement the diminishing eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-old segment of the population. Further, colleges engaging in the assessment of experiential learning provide a public service by easing accessibility to higher education for adults seeking personal and career development.

But experiential learning combines both theory and practice worth looking at on its own merit because of the insight it provides

into the nature of the learning process. It forces the higher education community to look at some questions that need constant examination: What constitutes college-level learning? What are the purposes of a particular educational program? and What kind of learning is being evaluated and certified when grades or assessments are recorded?

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